

The best roses in Rose City



The Royal Rosarians have a point-by-point system for judging roses, taking into account design, layout, pruning and bloom quality, among other things. Photos by Samantha Swindler, staff

Royal Rosarians hunt down the best rose gardens in Portland

Samantha Swindler *The Oregonian/OregonLive*

Everyone likes roses. Who doesn't like roses? But do you love roses? "Oh, mamma," said Gretchen Humphrey as she reached out to admire the spiral center of a hot pink, Signature variety hybrid tea. "This is a very, very good show rose." A few moments later, as we're exploring a backyard garden in Northeast Portland, she gasped. "Oh, my goodness, look at that beauty," she crooned before bending for a deep inhale of a bluish bloom. Since 1938, the Royal Rosarians have hosted a home garden contest as part of the Rose Festival. Teams of two to four judges drive across Portland and surrounding communities in search of the area's most beautiful rose gardens. Any garden within a 20-mile radius of Pioneer Courthouse Square is eligible. There's no cost to enter. Prizes are coveted lawn markers that announce to passersby, "This Garden is a Winner." I spent the better part of a recent Sunday driving throughout Northeast Portland and Vancouver, judging private and commercial

rose gardens with Humphrey, a past president of the Portland Rose Society, and Kimberly Bowen, who holds the title of High Lady Chancellor with the Royal Rosarians. Before we headed out to our gardens, Harry Landers, Royal Gardener with the Royal Rosarians, gave the group of volunteer judges a point-by-point breakdown of the judging scale. Design and layout, 15 points. Soil condition, 15 points. Pruning, 15 points. Vigor, 15 points. Bloom quality, 10 points. And the biggie: Maintenance, 30 points. "There shouldn't be any leaves on the ground, no petals," Landers said. "The roses should all be dead-headed. When I entered my garden in the contest, I was up at 5 o'clock that morning with a vacuum, and that's how I got rid of my petals." Royal Rosarians are a fraternal organization whose members serve as the "official greeters and ambassadors for goodwill" in the city of Portland. While roses are in the organization's name, members aren't necessarily seasoned gardeners. So for the garden contest, Royal Rosarians are paired with members of the Portland Rose Society.

The Portland Rose Society, founded in 1895, is the country's oldest and largest rose society. Georgetown Pitcock, of the Pitcock Mansion Pitcocks, started it. She loved roses and started a tradition of having small, judged flower shows among her friends. "That's how we became the City of Roses," Bowen said. "The garden clubs would pass out roses for people to plant. We've lost a lot of that, and hopefully with this rose garden contest we're bringing it back." Georgetown's husband, Harry Pitcock is past owner and publisher of *The Oregonian*, and his business partners saw the roses as a way to promote their city. They formed the Royal Rosarians in 1912. There are about 279 Royal Rosarians today. They can often be found at city festivals and events in their distinctive uniforms of white suits and straw boater hats, which have changed little over the past century, with one exception. In the 1960s, the Royal Rosarian tie went from white to red, because a pop of crimson looked better on color TV. Bowen, the driver for our garden tour, is a Royal Rosarian who knows her roses. She's president of the Friends of the International



The Madeline Parish & School rose garden in Northeast Portland was the 2019 Frank E. Beach Visibility Award in the commercial/public agency category.



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Rich Baer with a yellow rose sport — a genetic mutation that produces a new kind of rose — which grows only in his garden.



Rich Baer's garden was the 2019 Frank E. Beach Visibility Award in the residential division during the 81st annual Royal Rosarian Garden Contest.

2019 Rose Garden Contest Winners

- Royal Rosarian Prime Minister's Trophy:** Judy Fleck
- Pat Troyer Memorial Award:** Judy Fleck
- Terry and Virginia Schruink Memorial Award:** Molly Bauck
- Grand Challenge:** Dale Brandt
- Winner's Circle:** Karen & Merrill Allen
- Frank E. Beach Visibility Award offered by Portland Parks & Recreation Commercial/Public Agency**
 - 3rd Place: Labor Heights Church
 - 2nd Place: John Chapel of Roses
 - 1st Place: Madeline Parish Residential
 - 3rd Place: Gary Hartman
 - 2nd Place: Bob Lounibos
 - 1st Place: Rich Baer
- Visibility Award West of Willamette River:** Kristen Cole
- East of Willamette River:** Karen & Merrill Allen
- Commercial Rose Gardens and Plantings Business and Professional Buildings:** North-west College of Construction
- Churches, Hospitals, Retirement Centers and Schools:** Holy Cross Catholic Church
- Public Service Agencies:** Veterans Memorial Rose Garden
- First Time Entry:** Holy Cross Catholic Church
- Miniature Rose Plantings**
 - 25-50 rose bushes: Judy Fleck
 - Royal Rosarian Award: Carolyn Ann Saba
- Rose Plantings**
 - 25-75 rose bushes: Judy Fleck
 - 76 or more rose bushes: Molly Bauck
- Special circumstances:** Greg Audus
- Residential 1st Time Entry:** Kristen Cole
- Senior Citizen**
 - West of Willamette River: Wayne Bingham
 - East of Willamette River: Nancy Gal Smith
- Formal Rose Garden**
 - 25-75 rose bushes: Gail & Bill Flecher
 - 76 or more rose bushes: Molly Bauck

Rose Test Garden and also a Master Rosarian, which is the Master Gardener equivalent for rose growers. Humphrey, in addition to her role with the Portland Rose Society, is the immediate past district director for the American Rose Society and an all-around rose champ at the Portland Spring Rose Show, the largest rose show in the country. "She has won five Queen of Shows," Bowen boasted of Humphrey. "I can't express how extraordinary that is." It's very extraordinary, Humphrey is only the second person to attain that honor, and the only Oregonian with so many wins under her belt. This year's Royal Rosarian Garden Contest saw 117 division entries in 71 gardens across the metro area. Our group spent the day visiting and judging just seven of them. "We're looking for the beauty, we're looking for the personality of the homeowner in the varieties that they chose," Humphrey said. "We look for a healthy set of leaves, beautiful shiny foliage, hopefully without any kind of disease or insect damage. We look for color on the blooms."

The women inspect the plants' canes, they look for aphids, and they assess the pruning. In a few hours, I learn more than I ever knew I could learn about roses. They should be cut back every year. Pruning should occur just above a leaf grouping. There are fourfoldstar that grow clusters of flowers, and hybrid teas that grow a single bloom on a stem. The women asked if I had any rose bushes, and I confessed to two spindly Knock-Out Roses (oh, the shame) clinging to life in my backyard. But they encouraged me to give rose growing a try. I've purchased a Sun Shower, the official 2019 Portland Rose Festival Rose, with beautiful ombre blooms that go from yellow to white to pink. Despite all the meticulous care that can be given to roses, I've been promised that in our climate, they require only minimal attention. You don't need to be a Master Rosarian to join the Portland Rose Society. In fact, they'd love if you weren't. Membership is just \$15 a year, and the society is happy to give tips and advice to novice growers. The point of the Royal Rosarian Garden Contest, and the goal for the Portland Rose Society, is to

encourage more people to grow roses and to keep our identity as the City of Roses alive. Two weeks after our judging trip, the garden contest winners were announced at a ceremony in the International Rose Test Garden at Washington Park. The event had all the pomp and circumstance called for in an 81-year-old tradition. The Queen of Rosaria, Mya Brazile, held an armful of flowers and posed in her lara. The Prime Minister of the Royal Rosarians, wearing his fur-trimmed royal cape, escorted her into the event. Visitors at the International Test Garden occasionally stopped, pointed, and took photos of the ceremony. An antique banner at the center of the festivities proclaimed what Rosarians have been saying for 100 years: "For You a Rose in Portland Grows." swindler@oregonian.com